

October 13, 2021

Honorable Bob Menendez
United States Senate
528 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Menendez:

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG)—a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction providers, advocates and other stakeholders—is writing to express our support for the Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act. The bill, written following nine months of work by the Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, authorizes \$805 million in grants and other funding to support research, improve the pipeline of culturally appropriate providers, build outreach programs that reduce stigma, and develop a training program for providers to effectively manage bias and reduce disparities in access to and delivery of mental health care for Black and brown youth. While the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the mental health of nearly everyone, it is imperative for the nation to respond to the needs of young people that have not yet built the resiliency to handle such major disruptions but who have felt the brunt of the tragedy of this national emergency.

This important legislation includes provisions to address alarming Black youth suicide rates and mental health disparities among diverse children and adolescents. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth 12-18 years old and this crisis is even more severe for Black adolescents. Between 1991 and 2017, suicide attempts among black adolescents increased by 73%, while attempts among white youth decreased, according to an analysis of more than 198,000 high school students nationwide.ⁱ Other studies have shown an elevated risk of suicide among African American boys ages 5 to 11.ⁱⁱ Mental health conditions, previous suicide attempts and access to lethal means are among key risk factors in youth suicide.ⁱⁱⁱ Other factors, such as bias and discrimination, lack of access to culturally appropriate evidence based suicide prevention interventions, coupled with a severe shortage of diverse and trained mental health workforce, are suicide risk factors for Black youth.^{iv}

Notably, the Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act focuses on key areas such as support in schools, scientific research, and increased funding in existing programs. Specifically, the bill would:

- Establish and fund interprofessional health care teams to provide behavioral health care.
- Authorize grants to develop cultural competency educational curricula so students training to be social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists will be able to properly treat youth, regardless of race or ethnicity
- Authorizes \$650 million to the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) to enhance research into addressing mental and physical health disparities.

- Authorizes an additional \$100 million to the National Institute of Health (NIH) to partner with communities and support clinical research, including clinical research on racial or ethnic disparities in physical and mental health.
- Reauthorize the Minority Fellowship Program for 5 years and nearly double the current authorized funding level.
- Direct the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish a Commission on the Effects of Smartphone and Social Media Usage on Adolescents.

The MHLG thanks you for your leadership on this important legislation and commends you for your commitment to reducing or eliminating mental health disparities experienced by people of color and improving the overall mental health and wellness of our nation's youth.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Pediatrics
American Art Therapy Association
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association of Suicidology
American Counseling Association
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychiatric Nurses Association
American Psychoanalytic Association
American Psychological Association
Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Children's Hospital Association
Clinical Social Work Association

College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists
Confederation of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action
Girls Inc.
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
Inseparable*
International OCD Foundation
International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses
The Jed Foundation
The Jewish Federation of North America
Mental Health America
NAADAC, Association for Addiction Professionals
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of Counties
National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Association for Rural Mental Health

National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Mental
Health Program Directors
National Council for Mental Wellbeing
National League for Nursing
National Register of Health Service
Psychologists
Postpartum Support International
Psychotherapy Action Network

Sandy Hook Promise
Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action
Alliance
School Social Work Association of
America
SMART Recovery
The Trevor Project
Trust for America's Health
Well Being Trust

**denotes not a member of the Mental Health Liaison Group*

ⁱ Lindsey, M. A., Sheftall, A. H., Xiao, Y., & Joe, S. (2019). Trends of suicidal behaviors among high school students in the United States: 1991–2017. *Pediatrics*, November 144 (5) e20191187. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1187>

ⁱⁱ Bridge, J. A., Horowitz, L. M., Fontanella, C. A., Sheftall, A. H., Greenhouse, J., Kelleher, K. J., & Campo, J. V. (2018). Age-related racial disparity in suicide rates among US youths from 2001 through 2015. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 172(7), 697–699. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.0399

ⁱⁱⁱ Bilsen J. (2018). Suicide and Youth: Risk Factors. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 9, 540. doi:10.3389/fpsyt.2018.00540

^{iv} Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health. (2020) Ring the alarm: The crisis of black suicide in America. https://watsoncoleman.house.gov/uploadedfiles/full_taskforce_report.pdf